

TWO SLEIGHS AND A MAIDEN

By HELEN WOOD

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Joel Herrick drove along disconsolately in the moonlight, flicking his whip about Bay Charley's ears. Behind the yarn muffler his face wore an expression of disappointment and wounded pride, and it was evident that the five miles of fine sleighing before him on this keen, beautiful night held no charms. Disconsolate he looked and disconsolate he felt, for had he not just been scorned by the lady of his heart?

Little had he thought when he drove Susannah Peters out to Johnson's golden wedding that she would desert him, and for his bitterest rival, Ed Sparks, and yet—

Joel had danced often with the pretty, golden-haired Susannah. She, happily conscious of her new blue ribbons and pink cheeks, had beamed upon him, dancing his heart quite out of him and himself into the brave resolve to speak of his love on the homeward drive, for, although Joel had "kept company" with Susannah for six months, he had always lacked the courage to "ask her" point blank.

Now, Ed Sparks, on the other hand, lacked not the courage, but rather had pressed his suit, even when Susannah had clearly snubbed him. Perhaps it was done only to nettle the hesitating Joel, perhaps Susannah was really impressed by Ed's brand new suit of store clothes, scarlet tie and glittering cuff buttons and studs. At any rate, when the dancing was done and the big dining room was thrown open it was Ed Sparks who stepped quickly forward and "handed" Susannah to the delectable feast, and it was Ed Sparks who filled her glass with Aunt Marcy Johnson's best blackberry wine when the health of host and hostess was drunk. And all the while Joel Herrick, his heart eaten out with jealousy, tried to look gay as he served another and less favored damsel.

After supper goodbyes were said, the stone bottles were filled with hot water in anticipation of long rides through the cold night, the women bundled each other up in tippet and shawl, while the men harnessed the horses. To be sure, Joel had but one horse to harness, yet the crafty Ed managed to reach the house door first with his prancing young horses and a new, fancy sleigh. Susannah gave one swift glance from Ed's dashing turnout to staid Bay Charley and the old fashioned cutter. Vaguely she heard a chorus of feminine "oh's" and "ah's," and Joel's fate was sealed. She sprang into Ed's sleigh, the envy of every other girl on the great porch.

All this furnished anything but pleasant thoughts for Joel as he drove home alone, and when he realized that at this moment Ed's arm might be encircling the slender waist of Susannah he fairly groaned in spirit. Perhaps the bold fellow might even dare to kiss her. Joel grasped his whip tightly, and Bay Charley sprang forward in surprise.

Two miles had been covered, and he reached a point where the road wound through a patch of woodland. The trees stood gaunt, strange and black against the dazzling snow. Now and then a branch snapped with the cold, sounding like the report of a pistol on the still moonlight. Joel commenced to whistle from sheer loneliness. Then suddenly the sound died on his lips. In astonishment he saw a woman walking toward him. Nearer and nearer they came together. More and more familiar became the outlines of that feminine figure. As he slowed up it shrank back against a tree.

"Why, Susannah!"

"Oh, Joel, I'm so glad it's you!"

There were tears in her voice. But Joel remembered the slights, the humiliation recently put upon him, and hardened his heart and his voice.

"Well, Miss Peters, if you are going home alone I shall be pleased to take you under my care."

His tone was not inviting, but the shivering Susannah quickly climbed to his side. Joel touched up Bay Charley, but for some time remained silent. Now and then he glanced at the little figure crouched at his side, shaking with sobs and cold together. Joel's heart reproached him, and he finally remarked:

"Seems to me you ain't actin' right tonight. First you take up with a no account sort of fellow like Ed Sparks; then you go walkin' alone at this time of night. Where's Ed, an' what does he mean, leavin' you all alone like this? If he ain't treated you right, I'll take him out an' horsewhip him."

Susannah laid her hand appealingly on Joel's arm.

"I've been mean to you, Joel, but—but this ain't Ed's fault. I—I—fell out!"

Joel snorted incredulously.

"Yes, I did, too, Joel. We were just above old man Judkin's place, an' one of those big wild geese was lyin' in the road, we not seein' it because of its bel'n' all white. It just took an' flew right up in the horses' faces. They're spunky, you know, an' won't stand much, an'—an'—this very softly and slyly—"Ed ain't a driver like you. He ain't strong. They ran like wild, an' he had to stand up to hold 'em. An' when we turned the corner by the old apple tree the sleigh went into a post, toppled over an'—I—I fell out. An' when I got up I saw the sleigh swingin' from side to side an' Ed standin' up an' hangin' on to the reins."

Her recital came to a sudden and undignified end as she giggled at the recollection of her admirer's plight.

She tried to smother the giggle in the sleeve of Joel's great rough coat and then continued:

"There hasn't been a soul along until you came. I was scart to death. Everything was so white an' still, an' in the woods the moon was lookin' at me through the dark branches of the trees for all the world like a queer face. I—I don't believe I could have stood it much longer."

By this time Joel was chuckling over his rival's predicament, and Susannah sat up in sudden dismay.

"But you won't tell anybody, will you, Joel? The whole town'll be laughin' at me."

Joel turned serious on the instant. "No, they won't laugh at you. If they do, they'll have to answer to me. Besides, the joke ain't on you. It's on Ed."

But just at this time Ed was having fresh troubles of his own. Careening, swaying, he drew near Huflesburg at a racing gait, utterly unconscious of a racing gait, utterly unconscious of the seat before which he still stood, tugging at the reins. Occasionally he threw an encouraging word over his shoulder or told her how brave she was not to scream and add to their danger. The horses would soon run themselves out, and the road before them was clear.

But, alas, just as he turned into the town a sudden obstacle appeared in their track—Farmer Schneider's big sleigh, laden with the rosy cheeked Mrs. Schneider and three equally rosy daughters! At Ed's warning about Schneider drew his placid white mare to one side, but the flying team caught the rear of Schneider's sleigh, and a chorus of feminine shrieks was wafted to the fleeing Ed. The drift was deep, and the five Schneiders, when disentangled, found themselves uninjured, but nevertheless wrathful at the reckless driver.

In the meantime Ed had reached the center of the town, and his horses, exhausted and steaming, finally responded to the rein. With a feeling of intense relief Ed turned to his companion. Consternation seized him. Where was Susannah? Caught in the maelstrom of Schneiders? No, his cutter had not been injured in the collision. He remembered with horror that she had not spoken since the horses first began their mad run. What if she had been back there in the woods all this time, frozen, perhaps attacked by tramps? Ed was too frightened to be logical. With a curse he turned his fagged horses back into the road and whipped them on at a mad gait. Again he passed the Schneider family, and as the farmer once more pulled out of his way, this time more successfully, his goodwife murmured:

"I did not think Marcy Johnson's wine was so strong as that."

Half a mile farther he met Joel and stopped at the latter's vigorous hail.

"Good evenin', Ed," said Joel, with a cheerful smile for his discomfited rival. "Are you goin' to look for Susannah? She's here, safe in my sleigh, an' you can just bet she ain't goin' to make such a mistake again."

Ed ignored the complacent Joel and, making his best bow—that is, the best he could make while trying to hold the two astonished and trembling horses—said:

"I'm awful sorry I had such an accident, Miss Peters; but if you aren't hurt it don't matter so much, an' I hope you'll let me see you safe home."

Susannah choked back a persistent giggle and clung to Joel's arm.

"You see, Mr. Sparks—Mr. Herrick—I mean Joel—an' I—we—I'm just as much obliged!"

Joel took up her faltering explanation and made it clear.

"I don't mind tellin' you, Mr. Sparks, that hereafter Susannah an' I'll do our sleighin' together for all time, but if you want a recommendation to any other girl Susannah she'll give it, an' we won't mention this here little affair."

And Mr. Sparks, with a dignified up-lifting of his fur cap and a few unintelligible words, whipped up his horses, swung around in the road and raced back to town.

A Pleasant Interruption.

The following incident occurred at an entertainment in a large provincial town: On the programme a certain vocalist was down to sing "The Miner's Dream of Home," and to add special effect to the song he, having a friend a fireman at the fire station, about three minutes' walk from the hall, ran out and borrowed his top boots.

His turn on the programme came around. He appeared on the stage in all the glory of a blonde, slouch hat, white breeches and the fireman's top boots. His rendering of the song was a great success up to the middle of the second verse, when a commotion was heard at the entrance of the hall. Then a hot and eager fireman forced his way through the audience up to the footlights and bawled out at the top of his voice:

"Bill, you've got to come out of them 'ere boots if you value your life. I'm called to a fire!"—London T. Bits.

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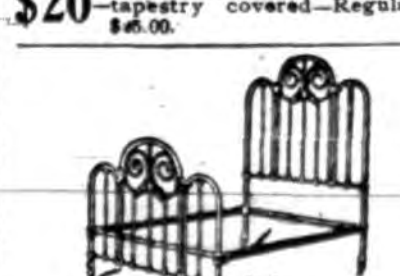
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